

News Media's Incorporation of User-Driven Communication Platforms into News Gathering, Production, and Presentation: *Credible Source or Incredible Claims?*

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Abstract

This paper looks at the implications of *user-driven communication platforms* (i.e. social media sites, and user generated content) upon professional journalism and news. Mainstream media's incorporation of these platforms, particularly in the reporting of conflict and emergency events sans journalist-presence raise questions regarding their influence upon journalistic routines, and on media-supported 'truth-claims'. The paper explores how user-driven images and information influences newswork, and highlights the importance of field correspondents and traditional 'legwork' journalism. The incorporation of user-driven information and images into news, and the dialogic commentary often accompanying them, suggest that professional news is evolving from a one-way mass medium emphasizing objectivity and verified facts, to a multi-directional interactive medium that accepts – if not privileges – immediacy, realism and punditry. These changes may bear consequences upon both newswriters' and news audiences' perceptions of fact, truth, and the credibility of news. This paper proposes qualitative interviews with professional journalists from mainstream news organizations to explore how images and information from user-driven platforms alter newsgathering, news production and news presentation. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, this paper sets the foundation for discussing how user-driven media's impact on these news processes influence journalistic notions of objectivity and credibility in transnational and national news outlets. Interviews seek to understand how user-driven communications platforms fit into newsgathering structures within professional journalism: Are they comparable to traditional news 'sources' such as figures of authority or eyewitnesses that journalists interview? Or are they a

form of ‘information subsidy’ that save journalists time and effort by providing factual, if interest-laden information, through media events, video news releases, or press conferences? Or could they be a more cost-effective alternative to ‘news wires’ that provide news organizations with steady streams of newsworthy updates and images? Finally, the paper explores ‘competing truth-claims’ in professional news that utilizes user-driven images and information. It argues that the role of field correspondents, and their networks of informants, fixers, and guides are now evolving to include not simply ‘foreign’ news reporting, but also to seek out the ‘truths’ as seen from the vantage point of digital have-nots. The paper argues that this is crucial in order to balance the flow of information and images originating from the users of user-driven communication networks. The importance of non-networked ‘legwork’ journalism in the 21st century lies not only in addressing the digital-divide, but also in circumventing the tight grip that some governments may exert over Internet and mobile telecommunications; and to manage authoritarian governments’ utilization of user-driven communication platforms to anonymously disseminate propaganda.

1. New Journalisms Literature

Scholarly work on the intersection between new media and journalism are dominated by research on online journalism (e.g. Carpenter, 2008; Domingo, 2008; Kautsky & Widholm, 2009; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Steensen, 2009; Thurman, 2008); media convergence (e.g. Avilés & Carvajal, 2008; Carvajal & Avilés, 2008; Cottle & Ashton, 1999; E. Huang, Rademakers, Fayemiwo, & Dunlap, 2004; J. S. Huang & Heider, 2007); participatory or citizen journalism (Bruns, 2005; Mark Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Domingo et al., 2007; Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007); and the how new media influence established business models (Beckett & Mansell, 2008; Bruns, 2005; Mark Deuze et al., 2007; Heinrich, 2008a).

What these studies do not address is that new media doesn’t just result in new forms of journalisms (e.g. participatory journalism, network journalism, networked journalism), but also bear implication on work processes in established news routines and media platforms (e.g. print newspaper or television news). Few studies have explored how new media is absorbed or incorporated into established journalistic routines and processes, or how new and traditional form of journalism coexist. Exceptions include Chris Atton and Emma Wickenden’s (2006) findings that alternative media’ sourcing routines mirror mainstream media’s structures of privileging the truth-claims of authority (as defined by individual media outlets) ; Mark Deuze’s (2009) findings that institutional, organizational, and cultural resilience of newswork preserve traditional norms of doing journalism;

and Wilson Lowrey (2008) and Charlie Beckett and Robin Mansell's (2008) study of the how new media forms facilitate boundary crossing in the work of professional journalists.

Established traditional journalistic routines and platforms are still significant players in the news industry, particularly in regions where traditional news forms are experiencing growth, such as China and South Africa (Beckett & Mansell, 2008). The explosion in the number of satellite news channels also quite literally suggest the growth of broadcast journalism. In addition, despite the growth in participatory journalism and the hype over democratization of news, media conglomerates that dominated the mass media age of print and broadcast news are also the main players in new media, drawing heavy website traffic and users of their mobile services (McCombs, 2005).

2. Normative Notions of Journalism

As are many, if not most, other academic discussions of journalism, this paper is premised upon a Libertarian normative notion of journalism, in which 'objectivity' and the pursuit of 'truth' are guiding principles, and in which journalism is considered vital to the creation of an 'informed citizenry', and plays the important role of 'keeper of the fourth estate'.

In other words, the institution of journalism, particularly mainstream professional journalism, is tasked with providing vital information to the public, and with the responsibility of watching public (and corporate) institutions on behalf of the public. In executing these tasks the news media also influences the issues and topics salient to the (informed) public. In the language of Agenda-Setting Theory, the media sets the public agenda.

However, the emergence of participatory forms of journalism challenges the thesis that agenda-setting occurs uni-directionally from the media to the public.

Maxwell McCombs (2004) suggests that news agendas are formulated and influenced by several layers of influence which he likens to the many layers of an onion, with the core being the news itself. The innermost layer influencing the core consists of the professional journalistic norms and routines guiding news professionals in their daily news gathering and news production tasks, and thus directly determines the topic and the framing of stories on the news agenda. The next layer of influence comes in the form of 'intermedia agenda setting', wherein news outlets routinely and continuously surveillance the news agendas of other news organizations, particularly that of elite news media (e.g. international news agencies, global satellite news broadcasters, quality national broadsheets), and that of market competitors. Finally, the outer layer of the metaphorical agenda-

setting onion consists of key news sources, comprising what Chris Atton and Emman Wickenden (2005) may term 'ordinary' citizens witnessing, or involved with, an event, as well as elites whose association with public or private institutions assigns them authority and credibility as primary definers of current issues, and allows their truth-claims to lead the news agenda (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978).

This paper explores an emergent layer overlapping between the 'intermedia agenda-setting' and 'key news source' layers, namely a digitally-networked user-driven layer comprising participatory forms of journalism such as professional mainstream news media's incorporation of user generated content and social media into their news coverage. On the one hand, user-sent videos, photos and even citizen reports of events, can be likened to the information that journalists routinely obtain from interviewing traditional news sources. On the other hand, insofar as popular social networking sites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook are used as platforms for some networked users to share information and to discuss current affairs which are then picked up by mainstream professional news media, these user-driven media platforms may also function as 'inter-media agenda setters'.

Taking off from this suggestion that user-driven digital networked media (i.e. user generated content and social networking sites) are emerging as journalistic variables that are as routine as key sources and intermedia news surveillance, this paper raises several questions concerning how user-driven communications platforms fit into newsgathering structures within professional journalism, and their implications upon the notions of journalistic 'truth' and 'objectivity':

Within the context of professional journalism, how should user-driven media forms be conceptualized? Are user-driven media forms comparable to traditional news 'sources' such as figures of authority or eyewitnesses? Or are they a form of 'information subsidy' that save journalists time and effort by providing 'factual', if interest-laden information, through media events, video news releases, or press conferences? Or could they simply be a free alternative to 'news wires' that provide news organizations with steady streams of newsworthy updates and images? Or, drawing upon the work of Mark Deuze and Tim Marjoribanks (2009), might they even be a cost-cutting threat to newswriters' jobs through organizational exploitation of the free labour of citizen journalists?

With regards to journalistic principles of providing objective coverage of verified truths, how do journalists and newsrooms negotiate the veracity of truth-claims originating from anonymous sources?

Insofar as news audiences are now empowered through digital networked media to actively monitor public institutions and political processes, and to provide media with news and information, how does mainstream journalism renegotiate its role as keeper of the fourth estate?

Furthermore, the incorporation of user-driven information and images into news, and the dialogic commentary often accompanying them, suggest that professional news is evolving from a one-way mass medium emphasizing objectivity and verified facts, to a multi-directional interactive medium that accepts – if not privileges – immediacy, realism and punditry. What are the consequences of these developments upon both newswriters' and news audiences' perceptions of fact, truth, and the credibility of news.

3. Current Trends in Journalism (Nature of Journalism Now):24/7 Rolling News: *Breaking News, News Updates, & Developing Stories*

In Gaye Tuchman's (1978) seminal work on the social construction of news, she suggests that "[o]ccurrences are more likely to be defined as news when reporters witness them or can learn of them with little effort" (p. 22). Undoubtedly, user generated content and social networking sites are easily accessible to 21st century newsrooms, and insofar as users of networked digital media habitually share information and images of events they witness or discuss current issues salient to them, this network accessibility to eyewitness accounts and public opinion would likely facilitate the notion that user-driven media forms are newsworthy sources of information. With minimal effort, journalists can easily utilize these user-driven media forms as a virtual 'news net' (to further draw upon Tuchman) with which to catch latest bits of information. Instead of the public "eavesdropping" through the news on the "[ongoing conversation] among politicians and policy makers, newswriters, and their organizational superiors" (Tuchman, 1978, p. x), social networking sites, chatrooms, and online comment posts, allow journalists to 'eavesdrop' on the 'conversations' of a digitally networked public.

In particular, conflict events such as the 2008 Tibetan uprising and the Iranian 'Twitter Revolution', as well as emergency crises such as the 2008 Mumbai bombings and the 2009 Sumatran earthquake, stand out as examples of media's reliance on user generated content to cover breaking news and to report on developing stories, as networked media users continuously send images and comments to media newsrooms or social networking sites. Such trends point to what can be termed a *journalistically sanctioned legitimation* of user-driven media as routine news sources, as indicated by the ever-increasing casualness with which mainstream news media reports attribute information

and images to user generated content, citizen journalism, social networking ‘conversations’, or blogs.

It should perhaps be noted that in addition to the ubiquitous availability of user driven media forms, the prevailing emphasis on 24/7 ‘rolling news’ may also be a factor in the routinization of user-driven networked media as a legitimate news source. Contemporary realities of news production place pressures upon journalists and newsrooms to broadcast news events as they occur, never mind if details are still incomplete or if facts are still unverified. The ease with which news outlets are able to upload and to stream ‘latest news’ or ‘news updates’ on their websites, to insert them into television screen crawlers, and to circulate them via mobile applications, allow newsrooms the option of ‘updating’ their news reports as journalists gather new details or verify earlier reports.

While both conventional wisdom and scholars note the democratizing virtues of participatory forms of journalism (Beckett, 2008; Beckett & Mansell, 2008; Bruns, 2003, 2005; Heinrich, 2008b), media researchers are also scrutinizing the working realities of emergent forms of journalism, and uncovering new power structures within mainstream professional journalism. For example, Chris Atton and Emma Wickenden’s (2005) study of one ongoing alternative media outlet revealed not a diversity of sources, but the privileging of a ‘counter-elite’ news sourcing practice in which alternative journalists routinely cite and quote at length grassroots political activists.

Similarly, in a reference to the constraints of professional news routines, a number of studies have found that the full democratizing potentials of user-driven media forms are not fully realized in the online ventures of traditional mainstream news organizations, or what the Pew Research Center calls ‘legacy media’ (see Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), 2009). Recent studies have uncovered a discernible trend indicating that traditional news outlets exercise extensive gatekeeping and editorial controls over user-driven news contributions, often separating citizen journalism from mainstream news content, and situating user generated content within editorially-defined news frames. For example, Steve Paulussen and Pieter Ugile (2009) have found that “newsroom structures, work routines and professional beliefs” hinders the participation of users in the news production process. Similarly, David Domingo and his colleagues’ study of US and Europe online newspapers found that user participation in these news outlets are largely limited to allowing readers the opportunity to debate current issues, “while other stages of the news production process are closed to citizen involvement or controlled by professional journalists when participation is allowed” (Domingo et al., 2008).

To address my earlier question of the where user-driven media forms fit in current structures of journalism, we may look to conceptualizations of the journalistic role played by user generated content or citizen journalism. Ansgard Heinrich's qualitative interviews with journalists from both mainstream and alternative news outlets suggests various ways in which journalists view user-driven media forms, ranging from user generated content as a new emergent forms of news sources and a "useful pool of information" (p.141), to networked users as "'optional participants' in the news production chain" (p.140) and a "global network of stringers"(p.137).

4. Interviewing Journalists

Paradoxically, in alleging that professional mainstream journalism now routinize user generated content as a legitimate claims-makers, this paper's own 'truth-claims' are yet to be substantiated by empirical evidence.

I would argue that in a study of emergent journalistic routines and processes, qualitative interviews would be particularly useful for understanding professional journalists' negotiation of new practices and new sources into their established news gathering and news production routines.

Ansgard Heinrich (2008b) for example, uses qualitative interviews to map out new structures and practices of journalism in a digital and networked global media environment she terms 'network journalism, noting that:

As the transformation process from a 'closed' journalism system to a network journalism culture is not completed and news organizations are still in the process of adapting to evolving network journalism structures, it was necessary to choose a methodology which would allow to understand an emerging phenomenon that cannot be narrowed down to a specific time-period in the past...[Pew Research Center surveys indicating increasing numbers of online news users] is vitally important as it assists to diagnose trends. However these statistics do not explain how journalistic outlets react to increasing non-linear news flows proliferated by digital technologies, how they handle the vast amounts of information available on- as well as off line and how journalistic outlets are reorganized in order to adapt to the transformation of the global news sphere." (Heinrich, 2008b, p. 98)

Chris Atton and Emma Wickenden (2005), explaining their combined use of qualitative interviews, content analysis, and critical discourse analysis in studying sourcing routines and representation in alternative news outlets point out that "the study of alternative media is still developing. Therefore

it is necessary to use a combination of theoretical perspectives, derived from mainstream media and alternative media research, to conceptualise issues of sourcing.” (p. 348)

Similarly, Pablo Boczkowski (2005) conducted qualitative interviews (as well as participant observation) in his study of innovations of online journalism.

I propose to conduct qualitative interviews with several different categories of media organizations, namely; international news organization (Al Jazeera English), state-funded Australian and Malaysian media organizations (Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Malaysian National News Agency), as well as commercial Australian and Malaysian media organizations (Australia’s Nine Network and Malaysia’s Astro Awani). Each of these media organization is a major news provide in its respective market, and routinely provide opportunities for news audiences to submit user generated news content.

These categories facilitate comparison of journalistic truth-claims under varied regulatory environments, organizational structures and editorial policies. With regards to regulatory environments for example, news organizations in Australia operate within a more liberal democratic regulatory environment than news organizations in Malaysia which are more tightly regulated by the state. With regards to organizational structures, comparisons can be made between organizational policies towards user generated content in international news organization, state-owned or public service media organizations, and commercial media organizations. For example, the incorporation of user generated content or social networking conversations into state-owned and public service news reports may be governed by local political considerations different from the more international political considerations of international news media. Commercial media organizations may operate under greater economic pressures than publicly funded media organizations, and thus may assign differing levels of significance to free sources of information.

Drawing upon the number of research participants in recent interview studies involving media professionals, I plan to interview 20 research participants. Atkinson (2008) interviewed 27 users and producers of alternative media; Chung (2007) interviewed 22 online news producers; Paulussen and Ugille (2009) and Domingo (2008) each conducted 20 newsworker interviews; while Deuze (2005) interviewed just 14 magazine editors.

Participants will be recruited via a transparent snowball method. I will contact the public relations arm of each news organization to request for access to their newsrooms, as well as introductions to key journalists willing to be interviewed. I aim to include journalists of different ranks in each

organization, specifically: one journalist, one editor or producer, one manager, and one new media expert. This structure helps to identify the particular corporate routine in each news organization but also a cross-outlet comparison of each journalistic rank.

These qualitative interview questions are designed to explore how user-driven media impact on news processes influence journalistic notions of objectivity and credibility. Specifically, they are designed to explore professional journalists' notions what constitute newsworthy and credible information, and how these notions influence their news selection, framing and presentation. Interviews also seek to understand how user-driven communications platforms fit into newsgathering structures within professional journalism.

5. Assigning Journalistic Credibility to Networked User-Driven Sources

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), with over 600,000 members in over 100 countries, in its Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists, asserts that “[r]espect for truth and for the right of the public truth is the first duty of the journalist.” (International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 1986). Similarly, the US based Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics – translated into at least 11 different languages - lists as its first tenet “Seek truth and report it” (Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), 1996). Drawing upon normative emphasis on ‘truth’ in journalism, it is easy to argue that truthful reportage is a prerequisite of ‘good’ journalism.

As illustrated by the controversy generated over findings that Pulitzer Prize winner Janet Cooke fabricated the story that won her journalism’s highest award; (online) public fury over Western media’s miscaptioning of photographs purportedly depicting Chinese police brutality against Tibetan demonstrators in 2008; and even news media’s practice of issuing apologies for inadvertent broadcasting of inaccurate facts, the breaching of truth in journalism, whether intentional or accidental, is a very serious matter. It may be argued that the journalistic practice of attributing ‘facts’, particularly what Tuchman calls “nonverifiable facts”, to identifiable news sources is one tactic for avoiding charges of fabricating truth or spreading erroneous information (Tuchman, 1978, pp. 90-91).

But where traditional news sources are more easily identified by their name, organizational or group affiliation, or even by appearance, therefore allowing journalists to confidently attribute their truth-claims, it is much more difficult for journalists to verify the identity of persons behind Tweets, user generated images, online comment posts, and user-driven platforms. Insofar as digital media is

extremely easy to manipulate, the task of ascertaining the veracity of user-generated photos and videos is also highly problematic. Furthermore, viral circulation of images or information is also possible so that information originating from one source with an agenda may appear authentic.

And yet, user-driven media platforms and their largely anonymous users are emerging as a journalistically credible news sources, despite these challenges to journalistic notions of 'truth'. Assuming that journalists are generally aware and sufficiently wary of fabricated truth-claims in user-driven platforms, how do they measure the facticity of user generated content and social networking conversations?

Drawing upon Ansgard Heinrich's (2008b) concept of 'nodes' in networked news sphere, it is possible that the 'nodal' position occupied by popular social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, is a factor in professional journalism's incorporation of Tweets or YouTube clips into routine news reports. Thus whereas source credibility is traditionally premised upon association with public institutions or authority, or is assigned by reporters through selection of 'ordinary' citizens for vox pops, it is plausible that 'credibility' of user-generated content and social networking 'conversations' is derived from network connection. A Tweet, for example, could easily become a news source, even though the Twitterer is not identifiable.

However, a process of what may be called *mass legitimation* seems to be at work in assigning credibility to information and images from user-driven media platforms. Although individual Twitterers are largely anonymous, mass Tweets or voluminous user generated images depicting the same incident lends it a veracity equivalent to that of an elite news maker or a professional journalist's account.

6. Privileging Networked Voices and Muting Digital Illiterates

This brings us to questions of the ethics of journalistic legitimation of networked truth-claims. If, as Tuchman suggests, occurrences most accessible to journalists are more likely to be selected as a news story, this would mean that non-digitally networked truth-claims originating from regions and communities in which no journalists are present would rarely make the news agenda.

The SPJ Code of Ethics, under the tenet 'Seek Truth and Report It', explicitly states that journalists should "[g]ive voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial source of information can be equally valid" (Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), 1996). (This code, incidentally, was last revised in

1996 (refer the code's foot note), in the early years of global Internet diffusion, and almost 10 years before the popularization of user generated content and social networking sites.)

However, the incorporation of user generated content and social networking conversations into mainstream news reports introduces a duality to truth-bearing in user-driven professional journalism. On the one hand, by giving air-time and bandwidth to digitally-connected groups (e.g. social activists; or networked citizens under autocratic regimes such as Iran) mainstream international journalism ends up promoting as 'truth' the perspectives of networked groups. On the other hand, by not seeking and not reporting the grievances and interests of non-networked groups, news media structurally excludes them from the news agenda. This contributes to a global politics of exclusions, whereby the interests and agendas of the digitally-networked are sought by time-pressed journalists, while the voices of digital illiterates are inadvertently muted.

This is perhaps where new journalisms play a vital role in addressing these structural imbalances of professional mainstream journalism. Blogger Jeff Jarvis' proposal of 'networked journalism', extolled by Charlie Beckett (2008) in his book *Super Media: Saving Journalism So it Can Save the World* describes a large scale participatory form of journalism in which "mainstream professional journalists must share the very process of production" (p. 4) to arrive at a new form of journalism that utilizes all possible informational and journalistic resources to give audiences the information they need to make decisions and take action. 'Networked journalism' is "a kind of journalism where the rigid distinctions of the past, between professional and amateur, producer and product, audience and participation, are deliberately broken down. It embraces permeability and multifunctionality" (p. 6). Martin Bell's suggestion for a 'journalism of attachment' that requires not only extensive legwork but also a sense of commitment to the subjects of the news story also reflect the altruistic ideals of networked journalism. The role of field correspondents, and their networks of informants, fixers, and guides should now evolve to include not simply 'foreign' news reporting, but also to seek out the 'truths' as seen from the vantage point of digital have-nots. These diverse forms of journalisms are crucial achieving balance in the flow of information and images originating from the users of user-driven communication networks, with the informational needs of those who are, to borrow Manuel Castells' (2000) terms, 'switched off from the network society'. The importance of non-networked 'legwork' journalism in the 21st century lies in not only in addressing the digital-divide, but also in circumventing the tight grip that some governments may exert over the Internet and mobile telecommunications; and to manage authoritarian governments' utilization of user-driven communication platforms to anonymously disseminate propaganda.

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